

COVID Crisis Spotlights Struggles of Teaching at a Distance when Students Have Special Needs

Behavioral specialist Lauren Szypula, a Lincoln Park teacher working with preschool and elementary students with autism, spends large chunks of her days on the educational communications platform, ClassDojo, and Zoom calls with her students' parents and others assigned to their care. Sharing space at home with her husband, a teacher working with high school students diagnosed with autism, and their three sons, she's conducting online IEP (Individualized Education Plan) meetings, outlining lesson plans, and providing weekly behavior intervention plans, tips and activities for the families to implement.

As the highly contagious coronavirus crisis continues and schools have moved to on-line learning for the remainder of the academic year, Szypula has been forced to make a hard pivot from one-on-one instruction time with her 20-plus students who have special needs to developing remote learning schedules that leave a great deal of the responsibility for children's education and development on the shoulders of stressed-out parents. These are unprecedented times, as Szypula points out, and she and her colleagues are trying their best, but the impact on students has been dramatic. "Students are unable to receive the direct services and direct instruction that the school setting provides. Not to mention, many of our students also receive outside services – ABA (Applied Behavioral Analysis, speech, OT (Occupational Therapy), social skills groups, and different therapies, and respite. Many of these centers that provide the services are closed."

While outside services to families with children with special needs have been "hit and miss," those that are venturing into in-home services do so only if both parties are comfortable being in the home together



Ms. Lauren's Weekly Behavior Tips 4.13.20

	Behavior Activity
Monday	Mindful Monday: Blowing Bubbles-Have your child focus on taking deep slow breaths, and exhaling steadily to fill the bubble
Tuesday	Take a Break Tuesday: Create a break area in your home and utilize it as a prevention strategy. You can use a blanket, pillow, comfy chair, duct tape on the floor, or a rug to designate your break space.
Wednesday	What about a visual schedule Wednesday: Start with your morning routine. Create a visual schedule that includes a few activities your child should complete each morning (example: make bed, breakfast, brush teeth, get dressed). You can use pictures from the internet, pictures of your child completing these activities, or written words.
Thursday	Timer Thursday: Begin setting limits at home. Set a kitchen timer (can be purchased at dollar tree or online) or use the timer function on your phone, to time 1 task you want your child to complete. Example, "you have 5 minutes of reading time, look at your book for 5 minutes" set the timer and keep it in view so your child can see the countdown/time left.
Friday	First/Then Friday: Another limit setting activity. Begin by using the first/then language at home this week. Example, "first breakfast, then brush teeth", "first your worksheet, then 10 minutes of ipad"

during the pandemic, she said. “Aside from private companies providing services, the only other option to a parent in an emergency (for example and extreme behavior episode) would be calling 911 or going to emergency for a hospitalization.”

The fear of learning loss opens door to extended summer experiences

With Gubernatorial orders leaving decision-making primarily with local and Intermediate School Districts (ISDs), local systems were required to develop continuous, at-home learning plans for all students and have them reviewed by their Intermediate School Districts (ISD). The downriver Detroit school district has stepped up to make accommodations, providing a Chromebook for every child who needs one and moving to other models of instruction so that they can continue their learning at home. For special education teachers in Szygula’s district, the local plan requires that Individual Education Plans (IEPs), which outline the accommodations and special services provided to special education students, will be completed using Internet or phone platforms with drafts sent to parents and students for their review. Solutions are proving complex for students with special needs. “With so many students on the autism spectrum needing social skill development, it is almost impossible to deliver that in a time where social distancing is expected,” she said. Students who are non-speaking or who have limited communication are also particularly challenged by the turn to virtual learning.

Moreover, there is great concern over the likely loss of critical skills while students with disabilities are away from their teachers and school routines. “Students with disabilities have difficulty with regression and recoupment over any sort of break from school, whether it be a weekend, a holiday break, or summer vacation,” she said. “We know it often takes students with disabilities much longer to recoup the skills they had prior to any sort of break in school services. I fear this will have a large impact on all students.”

When students with disabilities experience regression or learning loss, whether over the course of a summer or long break, the district provides for an extended school year. The extended school year kicks in on July 4, and Szygula offered this as a hopeful accommodation that would be available for all of her students who qualify this summer. Decisions on which student has the option to continue in the summer will be made on a case-by-case basis. “Come July, the purpose of the extended school year will not be to gain new skills but to hold on to skills gained through the school year.”

Under the directive for continuous learning plans, teachers in the district are required to provide two virtual lessons a week from the English arts and math curriculums, and a daily enrichment lesson to support the virtual learning and support IEP goals and objectives. These can be done on Zoom with the entire classroom using instructional supplies (whiteboards, highlighters, markers, paper crayon) sent home. Teachers also are developing packets with enrichment activities and communications boards for home use. To document that work is being completed, the staff communicates with families at least twice a week to check on progress. Preschool teachers are likewise required to provide lessons for students to complete at home with teachers creating Zoom meeting connections to provide live lessons – on letters sounds and number concepts, for example. Parent involvement is central.

Support staff including occupational therapists, speech specialists and social workers are being asked to create packages of “social stories,” a list of sensory ideas to use at home, core boards and a token system outline. As a behavioral specialist, Szygula provides a weekly behavior tips and activities document to share with families in anticipation of challenging behaviors that could emerge when routines are disrupted. To help parents directly, Szygula is using the ClassDojo platform to upload videos

and lessons for caregivers to view on their own time, encouraging them to use its messaging function to send her queries and comments.

Uncharted times call for innovations in service delivery

“These are uncharted times,” she said, referring to parent expectations for at-home schooling. “Working from home full-time and educating your child, it’s a lot. We don’t want to stress families out. We want to help them.”

Before the crisis, much of Szygula’s work involved a good deal of direct consultation with classroom teachers, and observing students in classrooms who were facing behavioral challenges. She conducted functional behavior assessments, wrote student behavior intervention plans, attended IEPs, and held regular parent meetings, once a month or more.

Today, their work is driven by necessity and innovation. Teachers are videotaping themselves doing lessons, reading books, or completing activities so families can watch and participate at a time that works for them. They are holding virtual storytimes and holding virtual classroom meetings. Many have delivered items directly to families in porch drop-offs so they have the materials they need.

“We miss the person-to-person contact, but everyone is doing the best they can to implement and follow the IEP, using technology and a virtual platform,” she said. “We are providing direct services for students but doing so virtually.”

There are no immediate remedies, however, for families whose parents are continuing to work outside the home during the pandemic. Her husband has older students with autism whose parents are grocery store workers. Michigan provides for education and workforce supports for students with special needs up to age 26. “I really feel for these students who can’t stay home alone. That’s a problem not only during the pandemic but in general. The answer is respite care but finding qualified workers for that job is not easy. A lot of families are relying on family members just to go to work.”

Then there are some families for whom the challenges of technology communication are too great to overcome. “Doing anything virtually is just too much for them and they would prefer to not. We still contact those families weekly and offer everything we can,” Szygula said.